

MBTA promises to take steps to ease concerns of rail neighbors

But other South Shore residents — especially those in towns not directly on the line — say the advantages of train service for many outweigh the disruption for a few.

"It would make things a lot easier. It might add a couple of years to my life," says Kevin Jones, 30, of Marshfield. Jones, an attorney, drives each morning to Braintree, where he takes the T's Red Line to his job near the Boston Common. On average, the trip takes 90 minutes.

Terry Fancher, general manager of the South Shore Chamber of Commerce and vice chairman of a citizens' advisory committee that has been reviewing the plans, says the region's economic development is also at stake.

"It isn't only about moving people in and out of Boston," Fancher says. "It's just as important that people who work on the South Shore can move around. A company trying to locate here looks at Route 3 and the first thing they say is, 'What are you doing about this?'"

Reaching a decision

As a decision on the project draws closer, the historically strong foundation of support for the Greenbush line has begun to shake.

There has always been resistance in Hingham Square from business and homeowners who fear trains would hurt the 18th century buildings that put the square on the National Register of Historic Places.

But opposition has spread since the Coastal Coalition formed last spring. It began with a handful of people and now has about 50 core members.

They say restoring Greenbush would ruin the environment, pose safety hazards and destroy village life. But most of all, they contend, the train would be a bad public investment.

They point out that it would cost at least \$215 million to rebuild the rails and millions more to operate the trains each year.

A better and cheaper idea would be to expand ferry service from the South Shore to Boston, they say.

"I accept the fact that I bought on the tracks," said Young, whose pale blue North Street home was once the Oddfellows Hall and is now assessed for \$346,800. "I will not accept that this is good for the South Shore."

The coalition boasts three recent victories.

In October the Cohasset town meeting narrowly voted down the train. This month opponents in Scituate forced the selectmen to call a special town meeting on the issue.

Support for the train with a rail tunnel among members of an MBTA citizens' advisory committee also eroded when four members voted against the train last month.

To investigate whether there is a better alternative to surface rail, Secretary of Environmental Affairs Trudy Coxe had ordered the T to study eight alternatives, including buses and boats.

The study found surface rail remains the most effective way to move large groups of people.

And last month Transportation Secretary James Kerasiotes, who chairs the MBTA board of directors, said he had reached the same conclusion.

Kerasiotes' comments outraged opponents, who complained that he was ignoring the public hearing process. They say his position is proof the state did not seriously investigate the alternatives it had been ordered to study.

"This whole thing has been a joke," says state Rep. Joseph Sullivan, a Braintree Democrat and vocal T critic who backs the Greenbush line.

If Kerasiotes gives Greenbush the go-ahead, it will still be far from the end of the story.

The T still will need to get approval from Coxe and the federal government. Either could send the T back to the drawing board for more studies.

And the town of Hingham is now threatening to sue the MBTA to stop Greenbush, saying surface trains would destroy the protected historic district. The Coastal Coalition is weighing a separate lawsuit.

If the project gets tangled in lengthy court cases, it's anyone's guess what will happen.

And if the timetable begins to drag out, money could become the pivotal issue.

The state is already scrambling to come up with its 15 percent share of the \$9.6 billion Central Artery-Third Harbor Tunnel project. It is under increasing pressure to contain transportation spending as the new Republican Congress tries to reign in megaprojects across the country.

Would the state still be able to afford to build Greenbush if it takes several years to get a blessing from the courts?

"I can't answer that question," Kerasiotes says.

Halley sees it as now or never.

"I believe very strongly this is it," he said. "If Greenbush isn't built right now, along with Plymouth and Middleboro, the likelihood is it will never be built."

Train foes are beginning to pin their hopes on just that scenario.

"Every day that goes by that there is not an order to begin construction, it means that construction might never occur," says Peter Pratt, a Cohasset selectman and train opponent. "It seems to me that picture is getting bleaker and bleaker on a daily basis."

Even some Greenbush backers now quietly question whether the Weld administration is actually trying to kill the train by pushing an unpopular plan.

"They can't afford this project, or they don't want to afford it, so they propose a restoration that is politically or legally impossible," said Hynes, who serves on the Legislature's Transportation Committee.

Kerasiotes dismisses such talk.

"We've been at this thing an awfully long

time," he says. "You don't invest this amount of time and energy if you don't intend to push this thing forward."

Train advocates are counting on Kerasiotes to hold fast.

"Sometimes, I can see it, I can imagine the first train coming down the tracks," said Grimes, whose \$159,700 South Street home in Hingham is only 20 feet from the rails.

Perhaps the best chance to keep Greenbush alive, according to some supporters, is to persuade the state to spend \$95 million for a 3,600-foot tunnel under Hingham Square.

And they see the 60-day public comment period as critical.

"This is crunch time," says Richard Prone, an Amtrak engineer from Duxbury, who's weary of driving his car to work at South Station. "We're going to the final bell on this, and we're going to finish with a flurry."

Back at Daphne Keeler's kitchen table, the Great Train Debate chugs on.

"I'll be very disappointed if the train comes," she tells her father.

Fred Cole smiles broadly at her.

"Sweet love of my life," he says, "I will be aboard to ride the first train through."

And at some stops along the line, the jousting has turned nasty.

Members of the anti-train Coastal Coalition are jeered as the "Coastal Complainers," while the pro-train people have been derided as "trainiacs."

There have been reports of vandalized signs and harassing mail. Language got so heated at some public meetings that people compared the trains to cancer, a massacre and a "rape of our town."

The communities along the line are among the state's most affluent and their residents among the best educated.

In Cohasset, for example, the average price for a house sold last year was \$257,000. The average household income was \$62,933. And more than half the adults are college graduates.

Hingham, the command post in the battle against the train, is a picture-postcard New England village filled with lovingly maintained historic homes. It boasts quaint shops, Colonial flags billowing from porches and the original Talbot's, the women's clothing store that defines classic upscale American taste.

"You've got a population that is well-educated, able to use the rules of the game that ensure their interests are, if not regarded or protected, at least listened to," the MBTA's Haley says.

Some say that translates into elitism.

"The train is not regarded as properly upscale — it's industrial, urban, for the proletarians who can't drive," says Ross Hall, 54, a Northeastern University professor and Hingham resident whose commute by bus and subway is long enough that he had time to reread Homer's "Illiad."

"I live in a town that has a very good opinion of itself," Hall said. "There is an area of taste and style very much involved in this. It's one of those things you're not supposed to talk about, but it's there."

That suggestion makes Randy Young see red.

"It infuriates me," said Young, 47, co-founder of the Coastal Coalition, whose 1828 Hingham home abuts the tracks. "They call us elitist. We're concerned citizens."

Why has a commuter railroad provoked such intense feelings?

"It's about equality and character of life," says state Rep. Frank Hynes, a Democrat, who represents Marshfield and Scituate and has been a major booster of the railroad.

"On the pro-side, this is an equality issue," he says. "The train would mean the South Shore is no longer a second-class citizen, that it would get the same transportation and economic opportunities that other areas have."

Thanks to a Byzantine formula, several South Shore communities — Marshfield, Pembroke, Duxbury, Hanover and Scituate — pay annual assessments to the MBTA but get no service in return.

Balanced against those who see rail as their right are folks who believe it would be their ruin.

They say it wouldn't be worth the cost, would drive down the value of homes along the tracks, lead to overdevelopment in a region with a fragile environment, and might eventually prompt the MBTA to look to towns for subsidies.

"People see it as a character of life issue," Hynes

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says. "They're afraid the train would mean an end to community life, a kind of village life they want very much to preserve."

While Old Colony passenger service ended in 1959, freight trains never stopped rolling on the Middleboro and Plymouth lines. Communities along those tracks have always been accustomed to trains, which chug mainly through sparsely populated woods, cranberry bogs or industrialized pockets.

But Greenbush is different.

The last freight train went down that line in 1978. Since then, brush has reclaimed the rusting tracks. One car dealer in Braintree uses a section of railbed as a car lot. Gardens and lawns have spilled into the right of way, and children play around old crossing signs. People have grown used to the silence.

Some bought property along the track based on assurances the trains would never return.

When Peter and Cynthia Robb purchased a \$176,000 home in Cohasset four years ago, their real estate agent told them the tracks 200 feet from their house would always lie dormant.

"She said, 'Don't worry about it; the train will never come'," said Peter Robb.

Trees that form a visual barrier at the edge of the Robb yard would be cleared for the train.

"We put all our eggs in one basket in this place," said Robb, 34, a manufacturers' representative who works from a home office facing the tracks.

"We love it here. But I don't know what we're going to do if this railroad is built."

Mitigation measures

The MBTA says it wants to be a good neighbor and would find ways to minimize the disruption the trains would cause.

Railroad ties made from long-lasting wood imported from Cameroon would rest on special rubber mats to absorb sound and soften vibration along certain stretches of rail bed.

Steel rails would be welded to be continuous, eliminating the nostalgic but noisy clickety-clack.

In addition to automatic gates, warning horns would be mounted on poles at 12 crossings where trains would be traveling more than 40 mph. That way, trains wouldn't sound their horns or whistles as they passed houses on the way to a crossing.

Still, the T expects that up to eight homes will be seriously affected by noise from trains while 26 homes and one church will be significantly disturbed by stationary horns and train bells.

The T may try to soundproof those buildings by constructing tall noise barriers or installing double-glazed windows or air-conditioning.

And despite any efforts by the T to minimize vibration, people in 209 houses and 13 apartment buildings would be able to feel the rattling of steel wheels on steel rail. The T says it will be annoying but won't cause structural damage.

The MBTA doesn't plan to buy any of the affected property. And it is still unclear exactly how much the T would help homeowners.

Critics fear the T wouldn't do enough, especially in Hingham Square, where they want the agency to spend an extra \$95 million to \$215 million to build a tunnel.